

“Life Improvements --- Mountaintop Makeover --- Choices: Cross Road Living”

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 & Joshua 24:14-18 Matthew 7:13-14

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.” Matthew 7:14

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. ¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Joshua 24:14-18

¹⁴ “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” ¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³ “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

During the past several weeks, I have been praying about what I should preach on for my last three Sundays with you. As I have prayed, the Holy Spirit has impressed upon my heart “finish the Sermon on the Mount.” Two years ago we started our journey through the Sermon on the Mount--chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew. During Lent of 2008, we did an eight-week series on the Beatitudes called “Blessed & Broken.” Last summer, we did a six-week series on the Lord’s Prayer called “House of Prayer.” As I

planned the calendar for the first half of 2010, the Holy Spirit again impressed me to continue the Sermon on the Mount. We began in January with “Life Improvement --- Mountaintop Makeovers.” This is the 13th message of that series. In 2008, the Beatitudes taught us about Christian character, and last summer, the Lord’s Prayer taught us how to pray. During the past two and a half years, we have spent 27 weeks on Mathew’s three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount! During this year’s series, we’ve heard Jesus say, **“You have heard it said, but I say to you.”** Jesus was confronting the religious teachers of the day because they had changed the Law to fit it more to their liking. We also wrestled with Jesus’ words to be the salt and the light of the world. We were confronted with Jesus’ teaching on anger, murder, adultery, divorce, making oaths. Remember what Jesus said about making oaths? **“Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’”** Jesus also had some strong words about resentment, retaliation, revenge, and... how to love our enemies. Yes, love...but Jesus did not stop there. He was on a roll as he went to the heart of the matter by asking us to look and see where our treasures are. Remember? Jesus said, **“Where your treasure is there is your heart also.”** After looking for our treasures, we came face-to-face with our worries, how we judge others and our prejudices—remember Walter the Worrier turned Walt the Wonder? Jesus now comes to the end of His sermon by reminding us to ask, seek and knock and to live by the golden rule, **“So in everything, do unto others what you would have them do unto you, for that sums up the law and the prophets.”** Treat others as you want them to treat you.

As I have been studying, the scholars all seem to agree that Jesus’ has made the many points of his sermon and now—He’s arrived at the “so what?” Jesus has spent the day teaching and it’s time for the people to figure out how to apply this teaching to their lives. Before we look at the verses from Matthew, I would like to reflect for a few minutes on Moses’ “so what” from Deuteronomy and then from Joshua’s “so what” in Joshua. What a life Moses has lived! From floating down the Nile, to parting the Red Sea! Moses had spent 40 years leading the Israelites through the wilderness. They are on the edge of the Promise land, poised and ready to enter. Moses is at the end of his life, he’s not going to enter the Promised Land but his people are. He gives the people his last message and it is a challenge to make a choice. Listen again to the words from verses 14- 18 from our Old Testament reading this morning: ¹⁴ **No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.** ¹⁵ **See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.** ¹⁶ **If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.** ¹⁷ **But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,** ¹⁸ **I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.** What a powerful challenge! What a commanding choice! Choose life and prosperity or choose death and adversity! After all that Moses has been through with the Israelites, his final “so what?” Choose life or choose death! Choose blessings or curses!

Joshua was the one elected to take them into the promise land. He’d already tried once; sent in as a spy and returning to say, “They’re giants but we can take them!” Joshua and Caleb got outvoted and thus, the Israelites spent even more time in the wilderness. Moses dies and Joshua rounds up the troops and heads in to conquer the land—the Promise Land. They’ve fought the battle of Jericho. In our reading today, Joshua is at the end of his life and the people are about to settle down and inhabit their new land. Joshua gives them his final words and concludes with another commanding “so what?” Listen to Joshua: **“Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”** Moses’ “so what” is: choose life and prosperity or choose death and adversity. Joshua’s “so what” is: who are you going to serve? Are you going to serve the gods of world or are you going to serve the one and only God--the world Creator? Life or death? Prosperity or adversity? Foreign gods or the one, true God? Choices! Standing at the cross

roads of life! Now we come to verses 13-14 of the Sermon on the Mount. Like Moses and Joshua, Jesus has hammered out his message and arrives at his first “so what?” He says, “***Enter the narrow gate...***”

THE CALL

The “so what” of Jesus’ teaching is a call to “enter!” The Greek word for “enter” is in an aorist imperative tense, used here as a command. “Enter”--it is not a suggestion, it is not a good idea or a nice plan. Jesus is not giving a gentle hint --- this is a command to enter the narrow gate. The interesting thing about this call is that it is time for us to make a choice, to make a decision. Some people come to the gate and turn around, others come to the narrow gate and admire it, while others choose to enter. Jesus’ command to enter is not to enter any gate but to enter the narrow gate. As I’ve studied, I found it interesting that some of the scholars believe that this call to enter is the call to enter into a life of the Beatitudes. They say that the Beatitudes are the narrow gate: blessed are the poor in spirit --- blessed are those who mourn --- blessed are those who are meek ---blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness --- blessed are the merciful --- blessed are the pure in heart and blessed are the peacemakers. One scholar suggested that the gate we are called to enter is like a narrow turnstile--where you enter alone, with nothing else with you and no one else with you. Do you remember, later in Jesus’ ministry He says that He is the Good Shepherd and that He is the gate? After all of Jesus’ teaching comes a call for us to make a decision. Enter. It is a choice we each must make.

THE CHOICES

The choice we get to make is between the narrow way that is hard and a broad way that is easy! I remember when our oldest daughter was in high school and she was going to her senior prom. She came to us and asked if we would allow her to stay at a hotel with her boyfriend and all the other kids from her group. She begged us and said, “everyone else’s’ parents are allowing their kids to do this.” I looked at her calmly and said, “Well, maybe everyone else’s’ parents are allowing their kids to spend the night at the hotel, but you are not.”

The way that is broad is the easy, attractive, inclusive, indulgent, permissive and self-oriented way of the world. There are few rules, few restrictions and few requirements. For some, the broad way might just be confessing Christ and then living for your own interests and desires. The broad way is filled with many the ungodly trinitities: me, myself and I. The broad way is a way where sin is tolerated, truth is moderated and human pride is exalted.

A side-bar note. The 2010 census is revealing that 109,000 people live in Round Rock. In the Percept Data they state that 30% of those people are totally unchurched with another 35% being occasional attenders—65% of 209,000 is 71,750. That’s how many people live right here that either don’t attend church or attend three or four times a year. That’s a lot of people on the wide road!

The way that is narrow is a hard way, a demanding way, the way of self denial and the cross. Later on in His ministry Jesus would say, “***If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.***” (Matthew 16:24) The Greek word Jesus used for “narrow” comes from the root word “stenos” which means “to groan, as being under pressure.” The Greek word that is used for hard in verse 14 can be translated with words like, afflict, press against, trouble or suffer tribulation. The way that is narrow is a hard way, a demanding way, the way of self denial and the cross --- not many travel that path.

The choice to walk the broad way is attractive, maybe even indulgent. The narrow way is restrictive and even humiliating. Jesus tells us that many enter through the broad gate of the world and only few enter through the narrow gate. The call is for us to make a choice. The choice is whether we will enter the

wide road and follow the world, or if we will enter the narrow gate and follow the soft sound of sandaled feet.

THE CONSEQUENCES

There is a call, there is a choice to be made and there are consequences. When we were raising our children, we would always tell them that there were consequences for their decisions. Good decisions or choices had rewards while bad decisions or choices had punishment.

After all of His teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says it all comes down to the “so what?” It comes down to applying His teaching to our lives. In verse 13 Jesus says that the road that is wide and easy will lead to destruction—and there are many who will take it. The word used here for “destruction” means total loss. There will be nothing left. On the other hand, the road that is narrow and hard will lead us to life. Jesus uses the Greek word “zoe” which means “the absolute fullness of life.”

When our eldest daughter asked permission to stay at the hotel after prom that was a choice for entering the wide gate. Allowing her to enter that road was far too scary. We wanted her to make a good choice with rewards attached. That’s what Jesus is saying—“hear me as I call, study long and make the right choice. You are at a cross road of life—choose wisely—there will be lasting consequences.” Prom that night ended with after parties at parents’ homes and ended with a breakfast in ours. The gate was narrow. The choice was theirs. I know our daughter is delighted with her choice. She’s now the mama of three little girls with a son on the way. Soon—her children will be standing at that same cross road. The call...the choice...the consequence—it’s the cross roads of life. When my wife became a Christian in 1979, she sold Home Interiors and she promptly hung up a plaque over our front door that said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” God has been at work in our lives for a long, long time. We’ve faced many cross roads, and this verse has pointed us always to the narrow way—that offers the fullness of life.

SO WHAT?

We come to the application mode of today’s message. Moses “so what” tells us that we have a choice between life and prosperity or death and adversity. We have a choice between blessings and curses. Joshua’s “so what” gives us a choice: Choose this day whom you will serve. Will we serve the gods of this world or will we serve the one, true God who created the world? Jesus’ “so what” is a call for us to enter the narrow gate. Each day we arrive at the cross roads. Narrow is that turnstyle...but if we make the right choice, we are promised the absolute fullness of life. That’s a consequence we can live with!

This morning we come to the table of life—the table of the Lord. Here we learn that we are forgiven. Here we are blessed with grace—grace enough for every cross road...even the ones that were wide and destructive. Here we stand forgiven. Every day we have choices to make: Follow the world or follow the world maker. The turnstyle has room for one...but once you choose...you will see the imprint of sandals. You will live the fullness of life. Promise. “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Let us pray.

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ⁱ¹*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.